

LOST IN THE SHADOWS

A True Story

by

Michael Colin

It is black like ink, dead of night; July, 1961, in Los Angeles. I'm six years old. Presently, I am awakened by a knocking at the front door. It starts intermittent, staccato, grows in pace and volume until it's an insistent pounding.

Beyond my room, I hear angry footsteps, then the pounding suddenly stops as the front door is yanked open by my mother. "Jesus Christ, Mike," she yells, "it's three in the morning! What the hell are you doing?!!" I hear a muffled response.



I slowly climb out of bed and open the door to my room. Through the crack of light, I can see my mother angrily confronting my father, who stands at the front door looking haggard and disheveled. I'm frightened, and become even more so when my father starts yelling about "the Cubans implanting listening devices in my brain" and "I should never have gone on the frog farm" and, lastly, to my mother with venom, "It's all your fault, maybe you should be dead!"

I run out to my mother and step between her and my wild-eyed father, screaming at him to go away. A fury is building in him, but just as he's about to lash out at me, my grandmother storms into the room brandishing a baseball bat. I watch, fearful, incredulous, as the scene before me slows down, and the universe narrows to this single, horrendous tableau: my father, in a rage and apparently gone quite mad, about to be struck with a bat by my equally livid grandmother.



The standoff continues for an eternity, until the police show up and arrest my father. I watch through a window as he is led away in handcuffs. Just before he is put into the squad car he catches my eye. There is fear and a plea for help in the look. My mother, brother and sister join me at the window as the police drive Mike Colin, husband and father, off to the psychiatric ward at County hospital.

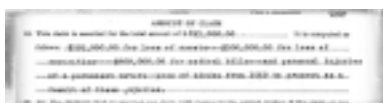
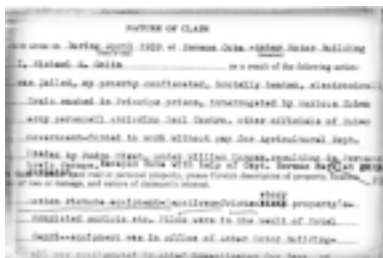
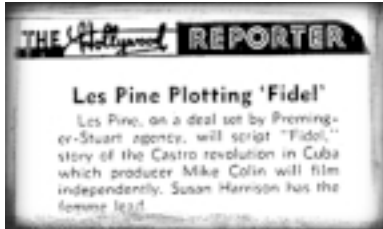
In the quiet that finally descends, still looking at the now-empty street, I ask what's wrong with my father, and what's this frog farm he was talking about? My mother doesn't answer immediately. Finally, as she gathers her three young children and herds us back to bed, she says, almost too softly to hear, "Something happened to your father in Cuba...." The words are beyond the comprehension of a six-year-old, and I feel only pain and confusion as the night draws me back in.



In January of 1959, my father, Michael Sidney Colin, went to Havana, Cuba, to make a motion picture about Fidel Castro's successful revolution. He had optioned the diary of Manuel Penabaz, a lawyer who had spent time in the Sierra Maestra mountains with Castro; had developed a script, "Red Runs the Sugar," based on Penabaz's diary; had recruited as director Michael Gordon, noted for such films as "Pillow Talk" and "Cyrano de Bergerac;" and had interest from both Frank Sinatra and Mel Ferrer to lead.

On March 1, 1959, an article in Havana's daily "El Mundo" painted a glowing portrait of the project and its principals, with a headline of "¡HARAN UNA PELICULA SOBRE LA REVOLUCION!" (THEY'RE MAKING A MOVIE ABOUT THE REVOLUTION!) But something about the article hit Fidel and his brother, Raul, the wrong way, because





the next day's edition of "Revolution," the rebel's newspaper, featured a page-one attack by Raul. Under the headline of "UN FALSO CAPITAN Y UNA FALSA PELICULA" (A PHONY MOVIE AND A PHONY CAPTAIN), Raul Castro not only discredited my father and his film project, but excoriated Manuel Penabaz as a traitor and a profiteer.

Penabaz fled Cuba, and my father's film project fell apart. Apparently, so did my father. He returned to Los Angeles in June of 1959 with a young Cuban woman named Olga in tow. My mother filed for divorce, and my father returned to Cuba with Olga. They eventually married.

My father's return to Los Angeles in June of 1959 was the last time any of his family saw him healthy and in complete control of his senses. Between the time he returned to Havana with Olga and the time he came knocking at our door in July of 1961, he somehow got stuck in the teeth of the Cuban Revolution, then chewed up and spit out.

For several weeks after my father's frightening visit in 1961, my mother had us taken to school and picked by private detectives. Then it all seemed to blow over and he just disappeared from the scene. In the ensuing years, I saw my father so rarely I generally forgot I had one.

He reappeared in 1968, when we were living in San Francisco. There was a legal deposition he needed from my mother, to support a claim he was making against the government of Cuba. I was into photography at the time, and surreptitiously took his picture while he waited alone in the living room. The photograph, taken from behind, showed him silhouetted against a gathering dusk. He was a vague, solitary figure, forlorn and chipped around the edges.

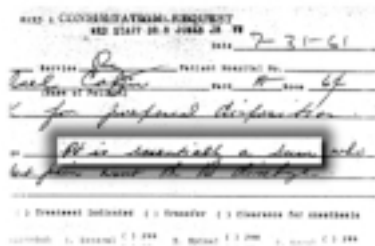
At the time I didn't know what he was doing there, and his presence entered and exited my consciousness like a blip. He was there, then he was gone, the only evidence of his visit was that single photograph. I remember finding the photo years later and thinking that I was looking at a ghost. In a way, I was. After that visit, I never saw him again. He died of a massive heart attack on August 30, 1974. I was 18, and had recently joined the U.S. Navy.

Shortly after his death I was called into my squadron's personnel office. The FBI was having trouble approving my security clearance, something to do with my father and Cuba. After spending a great deal of time on the phone with various agencies in Washington, D.C., I found myself talking to a clerk at the U.S. Foreign Claims Settlement Commission about the claim my father had filed against Cuba in 1968. Would I like a copy of the file? She had to ask twice, because the thought had never occurred to me. I said yes.

Two weeks later, a thick package arrived. His words from the first page of his claim: "I, Michael S. Colin, was jailed, my property confiscated, brutally beaten, electronically brainwashed in Principe prison by Raul Castro and other members of the Cuban army...forced to work on a frog farm...." All the same sort of mad rambling I had heard from him on that frightening night back in 1961.

I had no time for this. I was 18 and served three masters: Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll. I got my security clearance and the file went into a drawer.

Many years later, after a failed marriage and an unexpected shove into single-parenthood, I had reason to dig up the long-buried claim file.



A documentary producer in my late 30s, I was struggling with what it meant to be a parent, a father. I started wondering about the nature of fathering, which led to me wondering about my own father. Who he was, what he went through; what, exactly, was this frog farm thing in Cuba?

After looking through the yellowed claim file more carefully than I had when I first got it, I found myself more intrigued than dismissive. A fascinating story was unfolding before me, a story which piqued my interest more as a documentary producer than as a son.

But there was one small piece in the file that took hold of my heart and has held it for ransom ever since. A medical record of my father's from a 1961 visit to Miami General Hospital, where he had gone between leaving Cuba and returning to Los Angeles. The doctor had commented that the "patient is essentially a bum complaining of chest pains, want permission to discharge."

Essentially a bum? In spite of anything else I may have heard or known about him, there was never any suggestion that he was anything less than a fairly uncommon and gifted man who had suffered a mental collapse after "something" happened to him. On a frog farm. In Cuba. It seemed, at best, unfair to dismiss him as a bum.

In his claim, my father had suggested that details about his experiences in Cuba were to be found in the files of the FBI and CIA. I sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to these agencies asking for any files on Michael S. Colin. I then set out to find, and interview on video, anyone I could who had played a role in his Cuban drama.

Successful sleuthing and not a little serendipity led me first to Manuel Penabaz, the rebel with the diary; subsequently to Bill Watters, the PR man hired to promote the film project; finally, Richard Ibañez, the attorney who had helped my father with his claim against Cuba. Hundreds of hours of research yielded many articles about my father's project and events surrounding it. I had hours of interview material, but no answers more definitive than the obvious: after the film project crashed and burned, SOMETHING happened to my father in Cuba.

I went back to the Foreign Claims file and reread it carefully. When I was about to give up, I noticed something I'd glossed over before. In my father's narrative of his traumatic experience at the hands of the Cubans, he said he had been forced to work for the Cuban government, without pay, "under William Morgan." In wondering how this gringo name fit in with all the Cubans, I unwittingly found the core of my father's mystery.

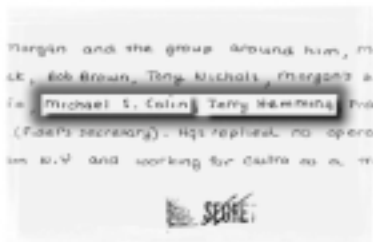
Caption from a photograph illustrating an article about William Morgan in LOOK magazine, March 21, 1961: "His two big passions: bullfrogs and Fidel Castro." I am almost too stunned about the mention of frogs to note that the article is, in fact, an epitaph for Morgan, who was executed by Castro a week earlier for heading a counter-revolutionary plot. I send FOI requests to the FBI and CIA for files on Morgan.

In the following year I received two responses to FOI requests. The first, from the CIA, contained a single page of blacked-out text with only my father's name, date of birth, and the word SECRET visible. It was, in FOI vernacular, "sanitized."

I next received the FBI file on William Morgan, a 380-page, heavily sanitized web of intrigue. As I flipped through the file, I learned that Morgan, an AWOL U.S. soldier, became involved in the Cuban Revolu-



United Press International
EXECUTED: Maj. William A. Morgan, who was shot by firing squad in Havana.



tion before all the rebel forces unified under Fidel Castro in 1958. After the victory, Morgan became a trusted confidante of Castro, and was put in charge of one of the Revolution's most innovative agricultural experiments: a frog farm on the outskirts of Havana. Morgan also may, or may not, have been a U.S. intelligence operative. Before he was executed, he had been at the center of enough intrigue to fill a bookshelf full of spy novels.

About half-way through the thick file, my father's name jumped out at me from a blackened page. "Michael Colin," it read, "William Morgan's former chief of publicity."

It was an overwhelming discovery. He had been telling the truth, and we had all dismissed him as a crackpot. Just as that doctor had dismissed him as a bum. In a single moment my detached, journalistic interest in his story became personal.

There were other close associates of Morgan listed next to my father's name on the page. On a whim, I picked a name—Jerry Hemming—and typed it in a WWW search engine. A moment later I was looking at a massive site dedicated to the theory that JFK was assassinated in a conspiracy...a conspiracy in which Jerry Hemming had played a key, if not primary, role. Headings such as "HEMMING: THE MISSING LINK" and "THE CIA CONSIDERS A HEMMING-OSWALD CONNECTION" skipped past my eyes as I scrolled ever deeper into the mystery.

My father had gone from being "essentially a bum" to a man with a secret, blacked-out CIA record; a man who had travelled to Cuba to make a movie but had somehow ended up as chief of publicity for an American Cuban Revolutionary who ran a frog farm but was later executed because he may, or may not, have been a U.S. intelligence operative who also had in his employ a man who may, or may not, have later been a prime conspirator in the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

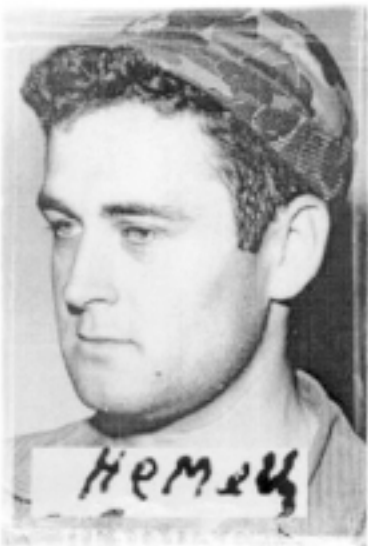
And all I could keep thinking was: Jesus, there really WAS a frog farm....

I look at the 40-year-old medical record yet again, as if the critical tidbit of information it contains has somehow vanished in the half hour since I last looked. But it's still there: my father's next of kin listed as "Olga Calero Colin, 509 Malecon, 2-C, Havana." This paper, this flimsy connection to someone who might know what really happened to my father in Cuba, is all I can turn to after I've hit a dead end in my research. So I grip the paper tightly, dance around the dead end, hop on a plane and hold my breath all the way to Havana.

In November of 1999 I went to Cuba to look for Olga, hoping to find more conclusive answers to my father's puzzle. On my first day in Havana, within fifteen minutes of going to the 40-year-old address on my father's medical record, I was knocking at Olga Calero's door.

Over the several days I spent with Olga, I learned that when she and my father first married, he did not know William Morgan. They lived in a tiny apartment that cost \$35 per month.

Olga's not sure exactly how or when my father met Morgan, but she remembers that soon after their meeting, she and my father moved into a 14-room oceanfront villa in Havana's swanky Miramar suburb. Almost immediately there was a steady stream of American men in business suits with briefcases showing up at the house. Olga says that the men would



go into my father's office, and when they came out there would be money on the table. My father never said where the money came from, and Olga didn't ask—but once. On that occasion, my father told her, with a grin, that he worked for the CIA. Olga, a naive country girl of just eighteen, replied, "What's the CIA?"

For about six months my father worked with William Morgan, including handling public relations chores for Morgan's frog farm enterprise. Olga says they spent almost every evening at Morgan's home, but the men would invariably retire into a back room and speak in hushed English.

One day while Olga and my father were having lunch at a club in downtown Havana, two secret police came and took my father away. He came home the next day looking as if he had been roughed up, and told Olga that he had to leave Cuba right away, but that he would return very soon.

She never saw or heard from him again.

I return from Cuba to find, after four years of waiting, my father's FBI file. It is 580 pages of mostly sanitized type. I pore through the file, my eyes widen at a certain familiar name, and in fairly short order I find myself sitting across the room from Jerry Hemming—Gerald Patrick Hemming, the alleged conspirator in JFK's assassination—and he is telling me how he met my father, how things were in Havana at that time, what it was like working with William Morgan and doing "the kind of shit that gets you locked up or gets you killed." It has not been easy to find Hemming, but I have flown across the country to talk with him because, besides Olga, he is the only other person who was there when my father knew Morgan.

Hemming is very certain that, at some point after meeting Morgan, my father was recruited by CIA "cutouts"—agents who work independently and with no visible attachments to the Agency. Hemming didn't know what my father did for the Agency, but he made it clear that almost everyone in Morgan's circle was an intelligence operative for SOME-ONE, only no one knew what anyone else was doing or which side they were on. Morgan eventually became mistrustful of my father and fired him in late 1960. Not long after, he was picked up by the Cuban secret police. And that is the last anyone saw of him until he showed up at our door in July, 1961.

One of the last things Jerry Hemming told me about was an interview with Morgan my father had arranged for Clete Roberts, the noted newsman from Los Angeles, in late 1959. I gave it little thought until I later found a passage, in a huge chapter about Hemming, in "Bloody Treason: The Assassination of JFK," by Noel Twyman. The passage is an excerpt from Hemming's deposition before the House Select Committee on Assassination on March 21, 1978:

"Hemming met Jack Ruby, in September or October, 1959, at William Morgan's house in Cuba...They were filmed [in Morgan's house] by Clete Roberts on Channel 13 in Los Angeles."

I uncovered that Clete Roberts interview in a box of film marked "Cuba Untitled" at the UCLA Film and Television Archives. I was stunned to hear William Morgan tell Roberts about Manuel Penabaz and my

by the HSCA. One item that Hemming met Jack Ruby, William Morgan's house in Cuban Air force, and Hemming them. They were filmed [in] on Channel 13 in Los Angeles



father's aborted film project. I emailed Hemming and asked him who had been present at the filming. He responded that, among others, he, my father and Jack Ruby were behind the camera.

I watched the interview over and over, and the second or third time noticed that, while discussing the PR campaign for the film project, Morgan looked momentarily at someone off-camera. For no reason other than a feeling in my gut, I am certain he was looking at my father.

Temple Solael sits in a comfortable corner of the San Fernando Valley, about 45 minutes north of Los Angeles. Somewhere at this temple there is a wall plaque to my father's memory, arranged for by a daughter from his first marriage. I've never been to this place before; I've never had a reason. I come here today to pay my respects, long overdue.

It is a simple plaque, set in a wall with many other simple plaques. "In Loving Memory," it reads, "Michael Sidney Colin."

On the wall of the temple outside, decorative metal letters spell out a serendipitous mantra: SEEK PEACE, AND PURSUE IT.

I only saw my father a handful of times between his wee-hours visit in 1961 and his death in 1974, and those were not pleasant visits. After Cuba, my father was, in the words of my mother, "not the same man." To me, he was for most of my life an abstraction...until some faceless doctor reached across time with a flippant comment, and challenged me to prove that he was more than "essentially a bum."

Definitive answers are evasive, and truth has an annoying habit of dying with its keepers. But as I continue this journey to retrieve my father from the shadows, I may have an ally. Jim Lasar, the D.C. attorney who was instrumental in getting the JFK records released to the public, is considering filing a class-action lawsuit against the CIA, FBI and other agencies, on behalf of children like myself whose fathers were killed or harmed by Cold War intrigue between the U.S. and Cuba. He is also pressuring Congress to convince all relevant agencies to release what they know about such cases.

The journey continues....